

United States Senate

March 16, 2020

The Honorable Ron Johnson
Chair
U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland
Security & Governmental Affairs
340 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chair Johnson:

We are in the midst of a global pandemic that is impacting nearly every facet of our lives. Our committee has the responsibility to provide oversight of the federal government and we have specific jurisdiction over the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), both of which are playing critical roles in the nation's response to this crisis.

FEMA Oversight Hearing

At our hearing on March 4th, I requested an oversight hearing with FEMA Administrator Peter Gaynor. It is unacceptable that it has been over 22 months since this committee has held a formal oversight hearing of the agency responsible for emergency preparedness and response and it is incumbent on us to provide oversight on how FEMA is preparing to respond to a natural disaster during this pandemic.

As the number of confirmed coronavirus cases in California nears 500, wildfire season is perilously soon and a major earthquake could strike at any moment. Addressing major disasters like wildfires and earthquakes requires a highly coordinated response that will be greatly complicated by our national emergency, including the social distancing measures being recommended by public health officials.

FEMA's all-hazard approach to disaster response was greatly tested during the multi-crisis hurricane and wildfire season of 2017. In Puerto Rico, we saw the devastating effects of an inadequate response to a natural disaster that turned into a public health crisis. We are now facing the prospect of a major natural disaster compounding the current public health emergency from the coronavirus pandemic.

It is critical that we learn from FEMA what steps it is taking to ensure the agency is prepared to carry out its mission in responding to natural disasters amid this pandemic. How will FEMA address the need for evacuation centers when public health officials have advised against large gatherings? How is FEMA preparing to have a significant number of personnel ill or in quarantine? How will FEMA handle an over-burdened health care system when thousands of potential disaster victims require medical assistance? Our committee and our states need the answers to questions like these before disaster strikes so that the government can provide adequate response.

CBP Oversight Hearing

It is similarly critical to ensure that CBP is equipped to carry out its responsibilities, including at U.S. ports of entry. As the administration rapidly implemented international travel restrictions, limiting certain international entries to 13 airports, travelers were forced to stand in lines for upwards of 6 hours, shoulder-to-shoulder. Two of the airports on that list of 13 are in my home state of California. These long lines at airports occurred as public health officials implored all of us to practice social distancing in an attempt to stem the spread of the virus, causing travelers concern as they attempted to navigate this confusion.

States and cities rely on the federal government to be a responsible partner in the operations of our nation's airports. According to Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot, the administration did not adequately consider the concerns of local officials, exacerbating the situation. While I understand that CBP is aware of the problem, we need a hearing to determine what steps are being taken and understand why there appears to have been insufficient preparation and coordination with local officials.

This is a public health crisis and we know that the federal response to the coronavirus pandemic has illustrated that CBP has already struggled to appropriately deal with a situation that was the result of actions taken to stem this pandemic. Unlike an announced travel restriction, we do not know when the next natural disaster will hit, but we do know that it is our responsibility to ensure that FEMA is prepared to lead the federal response to major disasters.

As the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, it is critical that we conduct two oversight hearings to hear from Administrator Gaynor and Acting Commissioner Morgan as soon as possible.

Sincerely,



KAMALA D. HARRIS
U.S. Senator

CC: Senator Gary Peters, Ranking Member, U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security & Governmental Affairs